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ABSTRACT

Problems encountered by language teachers involved in teaching culture are discussed in the introductory remarks of this paper. Leopold Senghor's definition of negritude as it is expressed primarily through literature is equated with the "...sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world." An educational experiment conducted at West Virginia University in which African culture was studied through the medium of literature is described. Selected works used in the experimental program are identified. (RL)

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Gaining Insight Into Sub-Saharan African Cultures Through Literature

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Anthropologists have frequently stated the opinion that culture is the sum total of man's activities, a theory which is confirmed by Jacques Maquet in Civilizations of Black Africa. He proposes the definition that a culture is "...a complex totality of material objects, items of behavior and ideas, acquired in varying degrees by each member of a given society." Consequently, the member of one culture who wishes to learn about another culture is faced with a formidable task in his efforts to penetrate this complex totality. The problem of introducing students to information about other peoples is compounded by the bewildering array of facts covered under such a deceptively simple definition. Curriculum designs for the teaching of non-western cultures generally call for courses in anthropology, history, geography, economics, political science, social science and the arts, all of which are highly desirable but not necessarily available to every college curriculum. Colleges which are engaged in the training of teachers for secondary schools encounter a major obstacle to their attempts to broaden course offerings to include a knowledge of African cultures in the lack of time available in an already overburdened curriculum. Very often the curriculum structure does not allow for the inclusion of a sufficiently large number of additional courses where a cross-disciplinary approach is clearly necessary. However, it is frequently possible to add supplementary materials to existing courses and to obtain maximum advantage by focusing on attitude changing techniques. Courses in language and literature very neatly fit the need for subject matter which can offer a large amount of cultural information

and can incorporate attitude changing methods with a minimum of additions to overcrowded schedules.

It has long been accepted by linguistic specialists that language is the bearer of man's culture since it is the medium through which he communicates all of his ideas and life experiences. By further extension of this theory, literature, which is what the writers of a given culture have to say in print, ought to be a written record of the ideas and experiences of that society. In the case of African culture this idea is born out by many prominent writers from Africa. For example, Léopold Sédar Senghor has defined the poetic literary theory of Negritude as the sum total of the Black man's culture. Over the years President Senghor has constantly reiterated the culture bearing intent of his poetry and that of his followers, in his public pronouncements, scholarly discourses and in his writings. In an interview reported in Les Nouvelles Littéraires of January 28, 1960, Senghor is quoted as saying that Negritude is "...the ensemble of characteristic elements of Negro-African civilization in all fields; cultural, social, political and economic." In his discourse before the parliament of Ghana which is quoted in Reed and Wake, Senghor, Prose and Poetry, London, 1965, Senghor again states that "Negritude is the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world. It is not racialism it is culture." Senghor has also carefully delineated the ways in which his poetry differs from Western poetry, first of all by incorporating African ideas and philosophical concepts, and secondly by its differing means of expression. The poetic techniques he advocates involve use of African words, symbols and images, repetition of sounds and above

all, a specific rhythm which is profoundly African.

Further reinforcement for the idea that literature offers an accurate reflection of a society is provided by Sunday O. Anozie in Sociologie du Roman Africain, in which he states that the African novel is realistic in its approach and that the novelists are concerned with social realities which are lived as a collective experience of the people. African literature can profitably be used as a conceptual tool in the attempt to understand African culture because it presents a unique opportunity to learn from the African himself. Written by the people involved, literature offers a first hand knowledge from the inside. It incorporates values, ideals and every day experiences and it can be used to learn about the intimate details of family life as well as a broad range of social activities. In short, it offers factual information about the entire multi-faceted experience of African life which our definition of culture requires.

The study of African literature offers an ideal starting point for understanding the culture since it offers the benefits of realistic and reliable inside information. However, one must of necessity go directly to the works written by Africans and not to works written about them by others. Mercer Cook, former ambassador to Niger and Senegal and Professor Emeritus in Language and Literature at Howard University, has remarked that"...the African writer portrays his own problems, aspirations and essential humanity. His creative literature offers an opportunity to learn from the African himself since the writers present customs, values, traditions and ways of life which are authentically African. Through novels, stories and poems which recreate the African world it is possible to broaden

our knowledge of the underlying civilization." By choosing judiciously among the many works by African writers which are now available, it should be possible to construct a presentation of various African cultures which is both interesting and informative for students. By using the technique of cross-cultural comparisons one should, theoretically at least, be able to change attitudes toward other cultures which at first glance appear to be so different from our own. Relying on anthropological theory that all cultures contain the same basic components, these areas can be taken as targets for comparison.

Recently an experiment was conducted at West Virginia State College in which the author, with the advice of Dr. Franklin Parker, Benedum Professor of Education of Education at West Virginia University, attempted to determine whether attitudes toward African culture could be changed by studying the literature of the people. While the results were not startling in their impact, they do reveal that a substantial degree of change occurred. A selection of materials was used which was calculated to appeal to student interest and for which the criteria of literary merit and cultural integrity was rigourously applied.

The first step in the experiment involved a pre-testing phase which attempted to measure the degree to which students held negative attitudes toward African cultures. The testing instrument was designed to investigate whether students believed in certain commonly held myths about Africa and the extent to which racial prejudice played a part in their thinking. Questions dealt with such common notions that Africa is one country which is hot, humid, covered with jungle where primitive tribes live in squalid huts. Other misconceptions incorporated in the test were that the

inhabitants' principal occupations are hunting, dancing and beating drums and that the African people are lazy, ignorant, disease ridden black heathens who possess no religion, history, language, literature and no art other than rude expressions of a warlike and ritualistic nature. Median test scores for the pre-test random sample of classes was 74.2% indicating that there was an average 26% degree of acceptance of commonly believed misinformation. Further analysis of test results indicated that most of the students' misconceptions lie in understanding African value systems and social organizations rather than in the area of geographical or economic information.

The preliminary test was administered in four classes at West Virginia State College and as a precaution the test was also administered in two classes in a private institution which has a much higher entrance requirement than the average state college. One class was used as a control and no further material was presented to this group. As might be expected the degree of change for the control group was minimal or non-existant in final testing.

The random selection of classes included two French classes, at two different levels, a general studies class in English and a social science class. The two classes in the private school were upper level English classes. Since there was such a wide variety in the student population in classes on all of these different levels, a broad selection of materials had to be made, but in general the same pattern of instruction was followed. A preliminary lecture explained the African oral literary tradition and the ways in which the current literary production has developed

in various parts of Africa. A few examples of fol-tales, legends and myths of origin were included. In general, the use of folk-tales was restricted and carefully prepared since the temptation is great for the non-specialist to interpret such information in the light of his own culture. From this point on the materials used were modern literary works beginning with poetry. All classes were exposed to selections from the Negritude poets of French speaking West Africa in the original or in translation. Works of poets from other parts of the continent whose works reveal certain cultural traits were also used. In lower level classes fictional works were selected from which certain short stories could be abstracted without the necessity for reading entire novels. Extracts were taken from Bernard Dadie's Climbié from the Ivory Coast; Guinean Camara Laye's L'Enfant noir; from Cameroonian novelist Jacques-Mariel Nzouankeu's Le Souffle des Ancêtres; and from Dahomian Olympe Bhély-Quenum's Un piège sans fin. On the upper level more selected poems from many other countries were added and whole novels were read including Ferdinand Oyono's Houseboy and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Students seemed particularly interested in the cross-cultural comparison approach and became involved in the learning situation to the extent that they could identify their own life experiences with incidents described in the African works.

The final step in the experiment involved a post-test which posed the same questions used in the initial testing and added a section in which students were asked to comment on their personal reactions to various items studied. Statistically the degree of

change indicated that on the factual questions scores improved an average of 14%. The section of the test which asked for expressions of opinion was even more enlightening. Students frequently reported surprise that family relationships in Africa are so strong and enduring, that education is so important, that African beliefs and customs may have parallels in our own society and above all that Africans are human beings with hopes and aspirations like our own. To that degree at least the experiement has proven successful and the experience has been profitable in terms of education for international understanding because in the words of Dunduzu Chisiza of Malawi"...the listener with an open mind has the open sesame to knowledge and wisdom."

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